

The Corps of Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Mentoring in Afghanistan

By

CWO Mike Hayes
28 Service Battalion



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Introduction

The first half of this account was published in the Electrical and Mechanical Engineering Association Newsletter in January 2009. I have used the acronyms listed below in this account. OPSEC is of primary importance, so some things are purposely vague.

ANA	Afghanistan National Army
Battle Rattle	Combat clothing, body-armour, tactical vest, pistol in holster, C8 carbine, helmet, camelback/small pack (a total of approximately 70 extra pounds).
C17	Very Big Plane
CSS	Combat Service Support
FOB ATAL	Forward Operating Base ATAL (Camp Hero)
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISO	Insulated Sea Container with door and window
KAF	Kandahar Airfield
Kandak 5	Fifth Battalion
KIA	Killed in Action
KFS	Knife, Fork, Spoon
OPSEC	Operational Security
RIP	Replacement in Place
ROSMI	Reception Centre

Work Up Training

As a reservist in a leadership position, I volunteered for Afghanistan back in early 2007. I could not request personnel to volunteer if I was not doing it as well, and I believed in what we are doing in Afghanistan. As part of TF 3-08, there are over 600 reservists. In March 2008, I was asked if I was interested in position X and I said that I was. I then talked it over with Dave Bennett and knew that he and ADGA fully supported me in this endeavour. I was then given a reporting date, and eighteen days later, I was in CFB Petawawa for work-up training. This training also included many briefings, administrative reviews, medical checks including numerous needles, and two weeks in Virginia for the US Army Joint Course in Logistics. Upon completing training, documentation, etc., we were sent on leave and reported back to Petawawa two days before the flight. As you can imagine, rotating 2,500 personnel in, while you rotate 2,500 others out to RIP is no easy task. As we travelled to Trenton for our great adventure, we stopped at Tweed. There, we were treated the best that I have ever seen in my 32 years in uniform as the Tweed Legion bought every soldier on every bus over many weeks a coffee at Tim Horton's. School children had flags out and banners were flying. It was very moving, especially to those of us who had had eggs and tomatoes thrown at us in the late 70's for wearing a uniform.

The Road to Kandahar Airfield

Once we arrived in Trenton, I ran into someone that I had not seen in a few years. We first met at Army Cadet camp back in 1973 (yes, 35 years ago), and sat together on the plane to talk over old times. The rental plane was good, and we actually had some hot meals with decent movies. Our first stop to refuel, get new crew, and empty the toilets and bring on more food was in France. Naturally, we could not get off the plane at 0 dark 30, but at least they opened the doors to help change the air. Those that smoke were really starting to get agitated, but luckily they didn't have their guns yet.

We took off again, and had time for a couple of more meals and some more movies until our next stop. There, they opened the doors and the heat and humidity rushed in, but no one fainted on our flight, although some did on previous flights. A few hours on the ground sorting kit, having a meal, and issuing weapons and ammo, our final flight in one of our brand new C-17's was off the ground. Fully loaded with troops in full battle rattle is an interesting experience to say the least. With the extra 70 lbs of gear being worn, including the helmet for takeoff and landing and tactical flying, landing was a welcome experience after a couple of hours. The aircraft came in fast and steep in case something is being fired at us. We got off the plane and were herded onto buses to the ROSMI. There we were briefed and would spend the next three days confirming current situation, weapons, etc. The team that we were replacing, met us there and moved our gear to our rooms, which was great instead of being herded in with 200-300 others in a big smelly tent. You can imagine 200-300 hot, smelly soldiers in one room at 55 degrees C outside, those ladies really smell, especially after travelling for two straight days.

Transition

We were introduced to the ANA personnel and our interpreters, and started taking over the mentoring process from our predecessors, who wanted to go home for some reason. The mentoring is to help the ANA move towards becoming a professional army, capable of carrying on when we are not here. This is very, very challenging, because the education level of most Afghans is extremely low. Most cannot read or write, and as an example if you told someone to go to building #212, he cannot read the #, no matter what language it is written in. However, the individual soldiers want to learn and we are there to help them.

Mentoring

My particular job was the Transport Mentor of Kandak 5, First Brigade, 205 Corps, located at Camp Hero (FOB ATAL) located near KAF. Our team live in KAF and travel to Camp Hero every day (which is considered as outside the wire). As we mentor CSS issues to transform the ANA into a professional army,

there are significant challenges of culture, religion, economics, education, and initiative to name but a few. I've been dealing with the company commander for a couple of months now, along with his officers and senior NCO's, and headway is being made. We are improving their convoy drills, battle procedure, and basic soldiering skills, so more of them can stay alive in a nation that is trying to rebuild itself while fighting a war. However, this is unlike most other wars, because the bad guys are terrorists, blowing up schools and shooting people because they work for Canadians, and using young children for suicide bombers. No civilized individual and especially no soldier would ever consider doing such horrific things.

Volunteering

As we progress with training, in my spare time I have also started volunteering at a local school, to get it physically off the ground. This is, in my opinion what will change this country in the future, getting these young people educated, allowing girls to go to school, and growing as a nation. My interpreter who is 21-22 years old (he is not certain) had never seen girls in a school until I took him to Sayad Pacha School about a month ago. Today (13 November 2008) a group of Canadians went to conduct a garbage sweep in preparation for putting in a playground, volleyball court and soccer field. But there was a difference. We started with a sweep for mines and IEDs, followed by a safety briefing, and ensured we had medics present in the event something did occur, although nothing did. We had the children out helping us in this sweep and Canadians held the garbage bags to ensure nothing nasty (IEDs, bombs) was put into them. This was part of our due diligence in a hostile part of the world. However, doing this is very satisfying. We had one Newfie, who actually did the jig for the kids.

Holidays and Special Days

Canadian Thanksgiving

We had turkey dinner here in Afghanistan for Thanksgiving, with a few of us going ½ hour early, so we were only about 200 in line, behind some Bulgarians. It was good, and lots available at the one mess serving it (of the three messes). If you can imagine pumpkin pie for 5,000 and the same for Black Forest cake, it was great. Not as good as home-cooked food, as they do not have the same flavour, but good and even hot for a change.

Remembrance Day

After having been on parade through Cubs, Scouts, Cadets, and as a soldier for the past 40 some years, (I must be getting old) this was the most moving but least formal Remembrance Day, I've ever attended. Dignitaries from Canada, some families of our fallen, and ANA soldiers from our Kandak attended it. The monument is etched with a picture of every Canadian that has died in Afghanistan since we got here as a nation, totalling 97 deceased (at the time of writing). This service was broadcast in Canada on many different networks. Afterwards, Tim Horton's was free for the day for anyone on KAF.

Facilities

Living in KAF is not exactly a resort, but it is definitely the best I've stayed in while deployed on operations or exercise in my 32 years in uniform. As a CWO, I have my own room in an ISO container, with internet at a cost of \$70.00 US per month. The Internet is very slow, intermittent, and full of viruses attempting to get in, but we have it. We have laundry service with approximately 24-hour turn around. The communal washrooms now have toilet paper, after six weeks of paper towel, cut by a bandsaw into three rolls. At least it was softer and not the brown industrial stuff.

We have many items available that in Canada we take for granted such as Tim Hortons, Subway, Burger King, and Pizza Hut. These operate out of sea containers set up at the boardwalk. Pizza Hut even delivers here. On one occasion, while we were at very limited movement for Army personnel, and only outside in

full Battle Rattle, Pizza Hut pulled up in their Gator with armour and helmet on. Naturally, I did not have my camera and neither did anyone else, but did we laugh about it. There are a lot of stores set up around the boardwalk to sell us items we require and also gifts, even a tailor shop for fitted suits. A bazaar is set up every Saturday that allows Afghanistan merchants to sell us their wares. They are escorted in after a full search, and guards in towers overlook them for our security. We even get the BEAR radio station here.

This past week we went as a team to the Dutch Restaurant, and it was the first sit-down table service meal since leaving Canada. It was a great change, as we also had real plates and steel cutlery after paper plates and plastic KFS since arrival. It really makes a difference to your personal morale to have a table cloth and service. There are two more restaurants under construction at this time, one Italian and one Thai. With thousands of personnel living and working out of KAF, it is a small city built around a very busy airfield, with most residents being armed soldiers from many nations. Having now been here over two months, routine is starting to set in, and we are all looking forward to our leaves. Mine is scheduled for mid-January-February 2009 and Maureen and I will meet in Hawaii. We are planning this trip now.

Part 2 - Continuing From 13 November 2008

Refocus of Mentoring

We have moved forward with our mentoring of the ANA with great success. We have moved them to the next level of development as a professional army, at least in Combat Service Support aspects. The Combat Service Support Kandak was formally assessed by an American unit established just to do assessments, and was well above anticipated level, which was great. Because of this a refocus of mentoring occurred, which meant that I would now mentor both the transportation and maintenance companies of the ANA for the rest of the tour. This has allowed me to expand training for the ANA soldiers in these two very important companies of the Kandak. I assisted the ANA in creating a driver course for Ford Ranger trucks and International 7.5-ton trucks, and in January and February 2009, they ran a course for 30 students. As I was preparing to leave for Canada, they were preparing to run an additional serial, once the driver training area was cleared of potential mines and IED's (things we do not think of when setting up driver training in Canada). This was the very first driving course run by the ANA for themselves and they did well. However, they do have trouble understanding what a stop sign is, and that four-way stops do not mean "I'm coming through"! Maintenance Company also moved forward with additional training with the support of the NSE Maintenance Coy. We conducted wrecker training, welding and carpentry training, and generator and electrical training to improve the skills of the ANA technicians. These small training sessions will help the ANA techs to recover and repair equipment better than they can now. As they move forward, they continue to learn quickly, despite a very low level of education. They are keen people and want to learn as much as they can from us. The welding and carpentry will enhance their civilian capabilities as well.

Volunteering

Well one of the most satisfying items of my tour has been volunteering with Sayad Pacha School. Since the garbage sweep mentioned in my last article, we have completed a:

- a. full mine sweep;
- b. graded the ground;
- c. installed a playground;
- d. installed a fence with a screen;
- e. installed a soccer field;
- f. drilled a new well and provided water to washrooms powered by a small pump;

- g. torn down the old mud school, carried out by ANA Engineers as training with heavy equipment;
- h. delivered school supplies to Sayad Pacha School; and
- i. fundraised both in KAF and Canada

At the end of my tour, I turned over the unofficial committee of 18 personnel to a major coming in as part of ROTO 7, which is great. We are turning over sufficient funds that the new people can start making a larger impact on the Afghanistan students and their families, in areas that we could not even consider, and doing it right now through skills generation, because money is available.

Technical Project

I was put in charge of a technical installation project for an ANA Corps, and it included personnel from four different armed forces and approximately another ten personnel from a civilian firm. At the end of the day, I had a technical team of about 20 personnel, plus two interpreters, installing a component on almost 700 weapons systems for the ANA. We established a work space outside, with sea containers for securing components and in the event of bad weather. We used the wooden crates upside down as workbenches, which worked out great and better than six-foot folding tables would have. The ANA techs started off using rocks to remove pins instead of hammers and punches. As we moved forward, we started to get them to actually use hammers. This was the first time I brought Tim Horton donuts to the ANA, and did they ever go after them. The project was a great success, and we finished three days ahead of schedule as well. The team had lunch at Camp Lindsey in shifts, so we could keep production going. This was a new concept to the Afghanistan people, because they shut down for a two-hour lunch every day.

Holidays and Special Days

Christmas Eve

On Christmas Eve 2008, a few Canadian soldiers under my control provided a humanitarian assistance delivery to former Afghanistan Air Force apartment buildings near the school. Approximately 220 families live there and they literally swarmed us for the items we gave them. Even though we were swarmed, it felt very good, doing something for someone who has nothing, especially on Christmas Eve. I was interviewed by CBC while doing this delivery, and people were climbing up the sides of the MLVW and grabbing whatever they could, even breaking into my truck to get a case of cookies.

I went to Christmas Eve service and it was packed. When we got to the candlelight part of the service, the temperature went up quickly. We had soldiers from over fourteen nations present for the same Christmas service. Some were from countries that Canadians have previously served as peacekeepers, and now they are here with us helping the Afghanistan people. We Canadians have been doing things right around the world. Former Warsaw Pact nations, which we were prepared to fight 20 years ago if the balloon went up in Europe, were also there for Christmas Eve service as part of ISAF. Thank God that the balloon never did go up. Even though the world has been in a state of turmoil without the iron curtain, we are not threatened by a nuclear war the way we once were, and former potential adversaries are assisting us here in Afghanistan.

Christmas Day

A lot of us decorated our rooms, offices, and vehicles to make it feel more like Christmas in the desert. Maureen sent a fibre-optic Christmas tree for me, which I set up in our office. We did a secret Santa, but because of our schedules, we didn't open the gifts until almost February, when a significant number of our team was present.

Christmas Day started off with me going around and playing Santa Clause, putting a small gift (cookies) at every room door of 2 Barrack buildings. This covered off 40 rooms per building and anywhere from

one to four persons per room. I wore my Arid CADPAT Santa Hat all day, except for some of my time at Camp Hero with the ANA in the morning. The soldier's Christmas Dinner was organized by each nation and we must have had a thousand Canadians present. As a traditional Christmas dinner, the turkey was piped into the dining hall, and then the senior NCOs, WOs and officers served the troops after the padre said grace. Feeding a hot turkey dinner to a thousand soldiers in what could be called a war zone is a wonderful experience for those of us that have worn the uniform.

Boxing Day

The ANA deployed for a brigade-level operation for the first time with a FSG out of Kandak 5, with a good number of our mentors deploying with them. We were having an OMLT BBQ, which I ended up being OPI for those left behind, when the acting CO grabbed me to inform me that a soldier in the battle group had been KIA, and I would have to act as RSM for the ramp ceremony scheduled for 27 December 2008.

The Ramp Ceremony

On 27 December 09, I was mentoring in Camp Hero for the morning, and then back in KAF sorting items out for the ramp ceremony, when I was urgently called to the TOC. At the TOC, I was quickly brought up to speed on the ongoing situation, and it looked like we (OMLT) had someone KIA along with the BG and ANA/ANP personnel. The acting CO, Adjutant, CQMS, and I went over to the Role 3 Medical Facility to await the helicopters that were incoming with WIA and KIA personnel. First in were WIA personnel, and we quickly reassured them as they were ushered into the facility for care. Then came the incoming with KIA from the OMLT, thought to be WO Roberge, but not yet confirmed. The A/CO, CQMS, and I carried him off the helicopter and to the waiting ambulance to be transported to the morgue. He was already in a body bag. We got to the morgue, and carried him into the morgue, where the official identification would be carried out. After they were identified, we were called into the morgue with one of our padres, and a small service was held over our two Canadian KIA. Now that it was confirmed who they were, families could be notified. I now started organizing a ramp ceremony for one of our own members with bearer party, escort back to Canada, etc. That night we had the first ramp ceremony for Pte Freeman. We continued preparing and practicing for the ramp ceremony for WO Roberge and arranging his escort to Canada. The ramp ceremony went off as well as can be expected when you lose someone in operations. I assigned his own section as bearer party once they came into KAF, to allow them to say their last respects. I had WOs and Sergeants on standby, in case they did not make it in on time. There were thousands of ISAF troops present for the ramp ceremony. Unfortunately, few were from the OMLT because of the ongoing operations in the AOR at the time. Upon completion of the ramp ceremony, the CO and RSM returned to KAF and complimented the A/CO and myself on a job well done.

New Years

Nothing special happened at New Year except for everyone wishing each other a Happy New Year and a few decorations around. It was work as normal for us in the OMLT, as the Afghanistan New Year is 21 March.

HLTA

For HLTA (leave) Maureen and I met in Hawaii and it was great. I'd rather be having the sun and sand in Hawaii than the desert anytime. The time spent in Hawaii was great, we loved it there, and hope to return someday. If I'm ever going to be a street person it is in Hawaii. It is warm all year round with public washrooms, including showers right on Wakiki Beach. We did many day trips around the island that were wonderful. This break from Afghanistan for me and from the snow for Maureen, even after 27 hours in the air in one day (yes you can do 27 hours in the air in a single day, depending upon how you fly) was well worth it. We did a beach church service, which was great. The travelling back to Afghanistan was

longer though as I flew in the other direction taking almost five days from Hawaii to Afghanistan and most of three days in the air. (Ahh)

Remaining Time

Because I had scheduled my HLTA close to the end of my tour, I only had about 6 weeks left. We moved forward in some training venues identified earlier, such as welding. These little things all count in moving, not only an army, but a people forward into the future.

Departing

After 6½ months on tour, I finally prepared to depart, and gave a few gifts to ANA leaders and my interpreter for their dedication and support to their nation. I purchased and presented five lawn chairs to them. These are very difficult for them to acquire, even if they could afford them, which most could not. They make less than \$500.00 US per month as an officer and a private gets about \$100.00 US per month. Some of them are even supporting large families on this kind of income. As I cleared out of KAF, I regretted that a few items that I was seeing headway on would not be completed, but at the same time it was time to go home. I turned in most of my Arid CADPAT gear, cell phone, ammo, and magazines except for those needed for the flight. At D-2, I completed my DAG administration and sorted out last minute details over the next two days. On D-1, another four of our soldiers were KIA, and we were on our last ramp ceremony. Following the ramp ceremony, we gathered the rest of our carry on (wear on gear) and moved through security to await our own flight out of KAF. We got on our C-17 in full gear and off we went towards our decompression.

A new American PX has opened and is double the size of the old one. It is like a small Walmart, with almost everything you might need including a car/motorcycle dealer. You can order a car or motorcycle and pick it up in the USA after the tour and some Canadians did just that.

Decompression

We landed in the C-17 at Mirage, and turned in some more of our gear, ballistic plates, weapons, and ammo. We had a shower and another briefing before being given our rooms for the night. In the morning, we arrived at the airport in civilian attire and loaded into a Air Italia 777 aircraft for Cyprus to decompress. Once we got to the decompression centre, we had yet another briefing, and were then given our room keys. I moved my gear into my room and could finally walk around not wearing a pistol all the time. I went out to a pub with a group of soldiers and they were all well behaved as they had a meal and a couple of beers for the first time in many months. The three days in Cyprus for decompression included briefings in the first two mornings, followed by afternoons off for a tour or whatever. The third day was a full-day bus tour. The weather was cold and damp, but we were in a more peaceful part of the world that less than 20 years ago was our main Peacekeeping Mission. Wow, how the world has changed.

Going Home

We finished our decompression and again got into our Arid CADPAT for the flight to Trenton and then home. Back onto an Air Italia flight with a stop in Spain to refuel, change crew, and add food. We were lucky to get a room in the airport, so we did not have to stay on the aircraft for the two-hour wait. We got back onto the plane and, eight hours later, we landed in Trenton. Maureen was there to meet me along with members of my unit and BGen Holt (retired) now the Colonel Commandant of the EME Branch and a friend. His son is now a third generation EME soldier in my home unit. Once Maureen and I got to our house, our children and their families were there to meet me. This was great.

Home for a Month

Now that I've been home for a month and a half, there are little things that we take for granted that I have very much fought for now, and I never would have thought that they would have such an effect. Here are some of these items that one holds dear now and why:

- a. real plates and cutlery, after using paper plates and plastic KFS for 6-7 months;
- b. toilet paper, after having paper towel rolls cut in three to use for months;
- c. a decent office chair, after sitting on a folding metal chair for 6-7 months;
- d. a reading light, so you don't need overhead lights on all the time;
- e. closets and dressers, after a year of using a barracks box, rucksack, and plastic drawer tower to sort your clothing;
- f. not having to co-ordinate travel with a security force;
- g. being able to drive on the side of the road, instead of down the centre to avoid IEDs;
- h. Kentucky Fried Chicken. (We had Tim Horton's, Pizza Hut, Subway, and Burger King) only because that is what I wanted for first family meal when I got home, but it had to be on real plates with real cutlery.

Mike Hayes
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